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OPINION

Shifting gears in L.A.

Many cities around the world, including some in the U.S., are putting the focus on bicycles for short trips. And they're making it happen. Shouldn't Los Angeles go with the flow?

By Robert Gottlieb

December 14, 2009

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With thousands of people, including L.A. Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa, gathered in Copenhagen to talk climate change, it's a good time to take note of that city's most significant contribution to reducing greenhouse gas emissions: bicycles. More than 36% of its residents ride bikes to work, about the same number use transit, and only a third commute by car. Is there a lesson for Los Angeles that the mayor can bring home as the city tries to reach its ambitious goal of reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 20%?

Clearly Copenhagen has the advantage of being smaller in scale. But that's not the only reason a transition to bikes has occurred in that city. Similar, though less dramatic, shifts are happening in the U.S., in places such as New York and Portland, Ore., and even Long Beach, which aspires to become one of the most bike-friendly cities in the U.S. Shouldn't L.A. embrace the trend?

To pry Angelenos out of cars and onto bikes, L.A. will need to become far more imaginative and far bolder than it has been. Here are some ideas:

We should designate some streets in neighborhoods around the city as car-free on weekends. It's been done elsewhere, even in Mexico City along its famed Paseo de la Reforma. There are groups in L.A. pushing to have car-free events, known in Latin America as *ciclovias*. Boyle Heights, where street life and public space are abundant, would be a natural place to test the concept.

Does it sound farfetched? If you have trouble imagining it, think back to several years ago, when the

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110 Freeway was closed one Sunday to cars and turned over to bicycles and walkers. It was a magical moment for L.A. that needs to be repeated on the streets.

To facilitate a shift to bikes, transit dollars and policy need to focus more on short trips, which account for more than a quarter of U.S. car use and its resulting pollution and greenhouse gas emissions. We need a "car lite" approach, as the bike advocacy group CICLE argues, that facilitates alternatives to cars for short trips. Some college campuses are already largely car-free and bicycle-friendly. We need many more such public spaces.

We need to reach out to those who think bicycles aren't for them. Copenhagen has been a leader in prodding women, seniors and others who have not been part of the bike-riding world to make the transition to everyday bike use. We need education and outreach focused on encouraging short trips, on communicating improvements in bike technology and on creating bike-friendly neighborhoods.

We need visionaries and "practical idealists" (as Villaraigosa likes to say) to push these kinds of changes forward. Janette Sadik-Khan, New York's transportation commissioner -- who is coming to L.A. in March to receive an honorary degree from Occidental College -- has been an inspiration to bike advocates and climate change activists alike. Wander around Times Square or down Ninth Avenue and you immediately see how the streetscape has been changed to accommodate bike riders and walkers.

Finally, we need to change our thinking. We need to view streets as not exclusively for cars. Bike riders need to make common cause with pedestrians and bus riders and street vendors to encourage a new way of envisioning the city.

"The street means life in the heady currents of the urban river in which everyone and everything can mingle," Rebecca Solnit wrote a few years ago. She wasn't thinking of L.A. when she wrote those words, but if bikes make a comeback in a city that, 100 years ago, was known as the bike capital of the country, we will be considerably closer to achieving a vibrant urban river.

Robert Gottlieb is director of the Urban & Environmental Policy Institute at Occidental College and is helping organize "L.A. StreetSummit: Biking, Walking and More" to coincide with commissioner Sadik-Khan's L.A. visit.

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los angeles has the potential of becoming the biking capital of the world. sure, it is spread out, but that's one of the things that makes biking in la so much fun.

biking in la is fun for the same reasons it's fun to drive around la. we have a great landscape and few hills to challenge new riders. plus, it hardly ever rains or gets too cold to ride.

we need to focus on creating neighborhood pockets where people can ride to the movies or to a bar or to pick up dinner. maybe one in ten will go out and buy a set of baskets or a trailer and take their bike to the supermarket, or even the laundromat.

this city has all the potential for this, if only i could do any of these things without nearly being nearly sideswiped, honked at or hit by an opening car door.

e.n (12/17/2009, 4:48 AM)

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To believe in cycling, one must believe in people.

Gottobike (12/15/2009, 7:52 PM)

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All comments on anything bicycle related boil down to three:

1) Cars are evil. They are the Problem. Traffic congestion is good cuz people will stop riding cars. Peak oil is good cuz people will stop riding cars. The sooner we are forced to stop being gasaholics, the better. Oh, come soon, Lord King Messiah Peak Oil!

2) It's not about cars vs bikes, folks. It's about walking, cycling, and using public transit when it makes sense, and using cars when it makes sense -- since most trips are only a couple miles, why not use bikes instead? Bike kids to school. Bike to work. Or bike to the train or bus. Bike to the grocery store. It saves gas. It saves money. It saves gym membership fees. It makes you happier. It is fun. I mean, they make cool bike racks with BUILT-IN bottle openers, folks... Hurrah for bikes!

3) You know who rides the most bikes? The Pinko Commies in CHINA, that's who! After that, the SOCIALISTS in Europe! Barack HUSSEIN Obama wants to take your RIGHT to a car away from you and make you ride stupid bikes! And after they take away our bikes, they take away our GUNS!

yoshiyahu262 (12/15/2009, 12:19 PM)

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